

Beginning and sustaining a programme of growth

With about five cycles of three-month activity remaining in the current Five Year Plan, communities around the world are continuing to exert effort to contribute their share towards the goal of establishing 5,000 programmes of growth. It is heartening to know that out of the 2,000 clusters that remain of the goal, the process of growth is advancing in many of them. Building on the previous issue, this edition of *Reflections on Growth* shares experiences from some of these clusters about the beginnings of a programme of growth.

The stories vividly illustrate not only the initial steps—how “meaningful and distinctive conversation with local residents”¹ occurs and how the first core activities may be established with the assistance of visiting friends and pioneers providing “a stimulus to growth”²—but also how the institute process begins to take root in a cluster and how local youth and adults, “eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings”,³ are being empowered to arise to serve and start their own activities. “Even if the work begins modestly with the actions of a few enthusiastic believers in a single neighbourhood or village, over time, through a sound institute process, an initial spark can grow into a flame that draws more and more individuals into a unified endeavour.”⁴

The document *Insights from the Frontiers of Learning* states:

A new programme of growth begins as two nascent capacities develop. First, one or more friends in a cluster must be able to help individuals study the institute’s sequence of courses and accompany them as they initiate core activities. Then, these individuals must be able to attract others to participate in the core activities. As efforts along these lines have borne fruit in various parts of the world, the institutions concerned set aside exaggerated expectations of what must be achieved before a new programme of growth can be said to have emerged.⁵

The friends and institutions are learning to recognize the emergence of these “nascent” capacities which signal the beginning of a programme of growth, and to continue to nurture them as the cluster moves forward beyond the first milestone. Through exerting effort and gaining more experience, their understanding is deepening that the process of growth in a cluster is organic and spiritual in nature—it requires perseverance and a humble attitude of learning, and it is dependent on divine assistance and confirmation.

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The accounts that follow illustrate how in diverse settings local residents are being assisted to study the institute courses and are accompanied in their initial attempts to serve.

Argentina

Bahía Blanca, which means “White Bay”, derives its name from the colour of the salt that covers the soil surrounding the shores of this medium-sized city. The cluster has been identified as one that could initiate a programme of growth by Riđván 2016.

In October 2013, a young woman serving as an assistant to an Auxiliary Board member saw in a dream Hand of the Cause of God Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm, who encouraged her to arise and teach regardless of the difficulties it might bring. Deeply moved and inspired by this, she contacted the Auxiliary Board member she assists and offered whatever service would be necessary. Shortly afterwards she and her husband were invited to visit Bahía Blanca to help the community to move beyond the first milestone, certain that confirmations would aid them if only they could take the first step and look for the doors to open.

With great eagerness, the couple travelled to Bahía Blanca and met with local Bahá'ís to consult about the needs of the community as well as the opportunities before them and what each one could offer. During the consultation they considered the available resources and realized that some of the friends had studied one or more of the institute courses, and there were two enthusiastic Bahá'í ladies, teachers at the local school, who offered to contact junior youth at the school. Trying to start a junior youth group was a natural next step.

With these initial efforts they felt surrounded by confirmations. One of the two school teachers reached out to more than 15 parents of the students in her class and personally visited each one of them in their home to share about the junior youth programme. Six junior youth were interested to form a group and so a space was found for the group to meet. A few weeks later a regular devotional gathering was started, and during the second visit of the travelling team, the friends studied Ruhi Institute Book 5, *Releasing the Powers of Junior Youth*. During the third visit, the friends were accompanied by the regional coordinator, and the junior youth group had its first meeting with nine participants.

Although finding a meeting space was a clear confirmation of the efforts of the friends, it had been offered at no cost, which meant they were unable to use the heating facilities. With temperatures dropping they could not meet in a cold room; this was the group's first challenge. During the fourth visit of the team, one of the two animators offered her home, which turned out to be close to where most of the junior youth were living. This allowed them to continue meeting, and the great potential of the group and deepening bonds of friendship and unity that now characterized their interactions were clearly evident.

Philippines

The Philippines has a population of over 100 million, spread across more than 7,000 islands and 81 provinces. The northernmost, smallest, and least populated of these provinces is **Batanes**, a single cluster with about 16,000 people. Some 20 years ago, a pioneer moved to this mostly rural province, and to this day he lives there with his family, one of the few Bahá'í families in the area. Hoping to lend impetus to the efforts of these families, a team of friends from elsewhere in the region visited Batanes for a period of 12 days. The visitors planned to help set in motion a process of learning about starting conversations with growing numbers of people about the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, and to lay the groundwork to begin a programme of growth.

Upon arrival, the team met with one of the Bahá'í families and consulted on ways to establish the training institute in the area. To guide their discussions, they studied together about the evolution of the global plans of the Bahá'í community, considering in particular the goal of their region, Northern Luzon. Recognizing the limited amount of time the team had, the friends decided to focus their energies in Basco, the capital of the province. With joyfulness and eager anticipation, they set out to have uplifting conversations on spiritual themes. These initial efforts sparked in six youth the desire to join a study of Ruhi Book 1.

Study of Book 1 was completed within a few days, and all six participants were accompanied to share prayers with families in the community. From the outset, those involved had their thoughts set on expanding the circle of friends engaged in the process. Because of this, they continued to visit and consult with local authorities and more community members, sharing with them a vision of the spiritual and material empowerment of the community and eliciting their support. One of the local youth discussed the community-building efforts she was engaged in with a guidance counsellor at her college, who then asked for a presentation on this theme to the first-year students. After the presentation, a handful of enthusiastic attendants joined a study of Book 1.

Ongoing conversations with Bahá'ís and other families in the town continued to bear fruit, and soon a children's class, a junior youth group, and two new study circles for Book 1 were formed. By the time the visiting team members returned home, a group of local friends—committed to nurturing the nascent activities—had already naturally emerged. The consultations among the friends in Batanes led to the realization that, though their efforts are still fledgling, they have already passed the first milestone in the long-term process of community building. Some members of the visiting team have continued to return to Batanes from time to time—often staying for over a month—to help the community advance along its path of progress.

Finland

Rovaniemi is the capital of Lapland, the northernmost province of Finland. It sits just 10 kilometres south of the Arctic Circle. It is a place of short winter days and sun-filled summer nights, and the radiant colours of the northern lights illumine the sky above Rovaniemi some 120 nights each year. There is a small Bahá'í community in the town with about twenty believers and a Local Spiritual Assembly.

With the call of the Universal House of Justice for 114 youth conferences around the world, a facilitator of the gathering to be held in Helsinki visited Rovaniemi to help encourage youth to attend. Over the course of the summer, Bahá'ís of the town had deepened friendships with some people from the wider community and had begun hosting firesides to share more about the Faith. As a result, six Bahá'í youth and three of their friends attended the conference in Helsinki, where their desire was ignited to contribute to the community-building process in Rovaniemi.

When they returned, with a newly found hope in their hearts of what could be, the Local Spiritual Assembly met with them, listened to their plans and aspirations, and found ways to lend support. A study of Ruhi Book 1 was organized, and as the months passed and winter came and went, the community advanced in its plans. Since many had previously been trained as tutors, the friends planned to offer a study of Books 3 and 5, with the study of Book 5 being assisted by an experienced animator from another cluster.

In light of their newly trained human resources, and with the encouragement and support of the Local Assembly which helped coordinate efforts and mobilize the friends, the community decided that their next step would be a collective teaching campaign. The campaign was held during one August weekend and almost every member of the community participated in whatever way they could. It was supported by regional and national coordinators, the Counsellor, an Auxiliary Board member, and the Local Assembly. The excitement and resolve of those participating to create an environment in which everyone could find their place, contribute their share to the process, and learn together both galvanized and confirmed their efforts. One children's class and one junior youth group were initiated in the neighbourhood. During their

reflection, the community, joyful and exhilarated from the experiences of the weekend, realized that by taking steps, with a humble and open attitude towards what was possible, a process of learning was set in motion. As the process continued to advance, they recognized that they had now moved beyond the first milestone.

United States

Of the 5,000 clusters to be engaged in a programme of growth by April 2016, the United States has set for itself the goal of 619. The Four Corners region in the south-western states committed 55 programmes of growth towards the national goal. The story of the Florence community in the **Pueblo** cluster in Colorado illustrates how progress in one part of the cluster can help the entire cluster to move along the continuum of growth.

It so happened that the Auxiliary Board member serving the area knew of a semi-retired Bahá'í couple with plans to move out of state. The Board member, hoping that they might be able to arise as pioneers, reached out to them to consult about the possibility of moving to Florence instead. The couple had found a home in Nevada that they liked and were about to place an offer on it. After speaking with the Auxiliary Board member, however, they immediately changed their plans, packed their bags, and headed to their new home in Florence, a town of less than 5,000 people set in the high deserts of southern Colorado, not far from Pueblo city.

The pioneer couple entered this new chapter in their lives with enthusiasm as well as some trepidation, unsure of whether they would be accepted in this new town. Confident of the divine assistance that descends on those who step onto the path of service, they opened their hearts and minds to new possibilities. They regularly visited the local farmers' market and a coffee shop in order to meet new people and even signed up for yoga classes. The people they met were friendly and welcoming, and they were able to teach the Faith and invite newly found friends to a devotional gathering in their home. One of these friends, whose heart was greatly attracted to the prayers, invited her friends as well, and in a short time there were 15 regular participants.

After the devotions, the conversations would centre on spiritual topics. In a loving and open environment, insights from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh were shared, and the training institute and core activities were introduced. As this emerging community continued its conversation about contributing to the betterment of society, they decided to visit the homes of other friends and invited parents and their children to participate in a junior youth group and a study circle for Ruhi Book 1. The Auxiliary Board member asked someone from a neighbouring cluster to assist with a study circle with the mothers of the junior youth. The group completed Books 1 and 2 and went on to study Book 5, recognizing the benefit of learning more about the critical period of junior youth.

The pioneers also made efforts to reach out to Bahá'í friends in neighbouring towns. This led to the first of regular reflection gatherings that attracted Bahá'ís and their friends, ready to contribute in whatever way their circumstances allowed to the unfoldment of the Five Year Plan in their community. From an initially modest level of activity, the cluster now has devotional gatherings, children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles. The couple says that they have never been happier in their lives, pioneering and being able to contribute to the community-building process in the Pueblo cluster.

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As the friends in a community advance through the sequence of courses and are helped to find ways to serve others, many naturally begin to share new insights with those around them. The next set of accounts illustrate how these local friends are starting to “attract others to participate in the core activities”⁶ and how “over time, through a sound institute process, an initial spark can grow into a flame that draws more and more individuals into a unified endeavour.”⁷

Russian Federation

Primorsky Krai, also known as the Maritime Province, lies on the Pacific coast in the far east of the Russian Federation, sharing its borders with China and North Korea and edging onto the Sea of Japan. The capital of the mostly mountainous region is Vladivostok, a city with a population of half a million and home to the largest Russian port on the Pacific Ocean. Some 400 kilometres from there in the Chuguyevsky District is **Uborka**, a small village settlement with a close-knit community.

In 2013, after a change in their circumstances, a young family from Vladivostok decided to move to Uborka as they wished to live closer to their aging mother. However, they knew this move also presented them with an opportunity to act as homefront pioneers and to try to start a children’s class in the village. The young mother, in an effort to meet new friends, visited the “culture house”, a village club that hosts various workshops for youth, junior youth, and children in the community. She met the staff and some of the participants in the different activities held throughout the day, and shared with them about the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme and the book *Learning About Excellence*. The conversation captured the interest of the staff and the junior youth, and soon with the help of her new friends the very first junior youth group in Uborka was formed.

As might be expected in any effort towards long-term action, there are inevitable advances and setbacks, crisis and victory. This was true of the efforts in Uborka, as within a few weeks of the formation of the new group, they were no longer allowed to meet at the village club. The pioneers learned that rumours had spread among the villagers and reached the ears of the chief, in which the motives and objectives of the junior youth programme were cast in a negative light. Opposition grew to the extent that the junior youth stopped attending.

When the family had first arrived in the village, they made efforts to visit families, sharing the aims of not only the junior youth programme but also the Bahá’í Faith, and they felt that some of these families were quite receptive to the Teachings. These initial conversations bore fruit some months later, when, after the announcement of the 114 youth conferences called for by the Universal House of Justice, the pioneers reached out to youth in the community. A group of four showed interest, and with the support of their families they travelled with the Bahá’ís back and forth to Vladivostok to study the sequence of Ruhi courses intensively over weekends and in longer institute campaigns. While the youth completed a study of Ruhi Books 1, 2, 3, and 5, the families that were first visited eventually became supporters of the junior youth programme.

The pioneers and local youth have learned to engage others in the community-building process. Through diligence and consistent effort they have managed to hold a devotional meeting, study circles, and a children’s class, with hope and potential for reopening a junior youth group. Despite the challenges, the steadfastness of the pioneers combined with the commitment of the youth to contribute to the advancement of their village has helped initiate movement towards a sustained pattern of growth in Uborka.

Zambia

Just south of the Kafue River in the Copperbelt Province lies **Chingola**, a picturesque city adorned with beautiful trees and flowers, known for having the largest open cast copper mine in Africa. In August 2013, after four youth from Chingola attended one of the two youth conferences in Zambia, they returned home with a renewed vision and resolve to contribute to the betterment of society. One of the adult Bahá'ís in the community—witnessing the hope and enthusiasm of this group—encouraged a Bahá'í youth to offer, with the support of the regional training institute, a refresher course in Ruhi Book 7. The aim of this study was to assist these youth to strengthen their capacity to serve as tutors.

The Bahá'í friend was aware that facilitating the refresher course was only one aspect of helping the participants to arise and serve—she also helped the participants invite others to a study of Book 1, and soon a new group was formed to begin studying the sequence of courses. Gradually, as the new participants in the study circle heightened their individual and collective consciousness about the power of prayer, they expressed their growing understanding with others, and in time a few families were gathering regularly to pray.

Meanwhile, the friends in the cluster were building up the courage to speak with people about the society-building power of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, and to help those around them see the expression of this power in practical acts of service to all segments of the population. This process continued to unfold and gain momentum over the next several months. In this period, two youth declared their faith in Bahá'u'lláh and were trained to serve as animators, and another Bahá'í from the community offered a second Book 7 refresher course.

The close attention paid to building the capacity of friends in the cluster was beginning to bear fruit. The cluster could now draw on three tutors, three animators, and one children's class teacher. All were eager to contribute in whatever way their circumstances allowed. These seven newly trained friends were supported to begin core activities, and after a few cycles about 50 souls were participating in study circles, children's classes, junior youth groups, and devotional gatherings.

As a result of this progress, it has become possible to appoint someone to serve as a growth facilitator, to coordinate and accompany the efforts of those facilitating the activities. The growth facilitator also ensures that the entire community in Chingola can benefit from what is being learned about raising the quality of study circles and about inviting others to contribute to the community-building process.

Sri Lanka

Bandarawela, in the Uva Province of southern Sri Lanka, is in a region known for its tea plantations and favourable climate. From a nearby community, a young woman, inspired by consultations about the needs of the clusters in her area, decided to arise as a homefront pioneer to Gonamutawa, a village in the Bandarawela cluster.

On the day of her departure, she noticed two buses leaving at the same time. Surprised by this, she asked the conductor about which bus she should take. He explained that both were heading to Gonamutawa, but which bus she could use depended on her caste. Unwilling to choose a bus and participate in such a division of the community, she decided to walk the distance to her new home. She felt deeply troubled by this aspect of her social reality and began thinking about how it might be addressed. “Many thoughts came to my mind,” she said,

including thoughts of Bahá'u'lláh and how He had entrusted her with the great task of serving as a pioneer.

Once in Gonamutawa, she found a place to rent and began having conversations with local youth. She explains, “I went to the area where some youth played every evening. At first I watched them play. The second day, they invited me to join, which I did every day for a full week.” As the friendships deepened, she was gradually invited to spend time in the homes of her new friends, where they had conversations on spiritual themes, the needs of the community, and how each could serve. “We spoke about the talents that we have,” she describes, “and how to help each other develop them.”

As the homefront pioneer continued visiting friends, she also naturally engaged in conversations with parents, sharing with them about the Faith and its vision of service to humanity. Families expressed their belief that this is what was needed in their village and encouraged her to gather youth to explore the spiritual themes they had been discussing together. However, their receptivity to ideas enshrined in the Faith—although growing—was not yet strong enough to overcome the centuries-old perspective on caste. Accordingly, the parents requested the young pioneer to hold two groups, because the members of each caste refused to sit together. Though saddened by this division in the village, she felt that with patience, love, and prayer all would work out for the best.

Within two months, two groups with a total of 11 participants had formed and completed a study of Ruhi Book 1, where their hearts were connected to the transformative words of Bahá'u'lláh. Combining study with service—an essential feature of the institute process—nurtured the capacity of the participants as each was accompanied to hold a devotional gathering, their first act of service in light of a growing understanding of the Message of Bahá'u'lláh. The first devotional gathering took place in the home of one of the participants, and friends from both groups came and prayed together. The significance of this step towards unity, inspired by the Word of God, brought tremendous joy to all. The two groups continue to meet and consult on the needs of their village and to serve together in the community.

As this small group learns to forge spiritual bonds of friendship that transcend prejudice, and develops the capacity to organize gatherings with their fellow youth to consult on the ways they wish to serve, the circle of friends grows and the path widens to include youth, adults, and families. The process that began in Gonamutawa has blossomed into a vibrant community with over a dozen activities and 70 participants.

Luxembourg

Differdange lies in the south-western corner of Luxembourg, about an hour's walk from Belgium in one direction and an hour's walk to France in the other. It is an industrial city, home to much of Luxembourg's steel production. Located on a hill in the centre of the town is Differdange Castle, which dates from the sixteenth century. The following account from Differdange shows how ongoing action, reflection, and consultation—where community members “learn to read their own reality, see their own possibilities, make use of their own resources”⁸—is an essential feature of growth.

The town has about 20,000 inhabitants. A believer living in this community—inspired by the Ridván 2013 message of the Universal House of Justice—paid some visits to acquaintances and friends in her locality, with the specific aim to introduce the spiritual framework and educational material of the Ruhi Institute. With the support of one of the Bahá'is from a

neighbouring town, she visited around fifty of her friends in less than two months. Although the process had started with conversations initiated by a single believer, it was gradually expanded to include a core group of friends reflecting and consulting together regularly. “The bonds of fellowship and love were strongly felt,” remarked one, “as we would gather regularly to assess the situation.” In time, four core activities were started: two children’s classes and two junior youth groups, involving 29 participants. These activities were first facilitated by visitors serving as animators and teachers.

The first challenge, even before the activities started, was that there was no physical space available to host the junior youth groups and children’s classes. Very naturally, after more consultation, the friends decided to hold a reflection meeting to which all of the participants and their families were invited. The meeting had a twofold purpose: to acquaint everyone with the teachers and animators of the activities and to consult about finding meeting rooms for the children and junior youth. In response, some of the parents opened their homes for the activities, in some cases offering the homes while they themselves were at work. The friends also presented the junior youth programme to local authorities, who helped arrange for the use of a classroom in a local school—15 junior youth now meet there weekly.

In the fall, the process was strengthened by regular reflection meetings with the families. It became apparent that this small core group of friends would be unable to both sustain and expand participation in the activities. As they paused to reflect, the team decided to focus its expansion on identifying youth they could invite to take part in the institute process, in order to increase the number of available human resources and to entrust the activities to local protagonists. In this way a group of youth studied Books 1, 3, and 5, and the first local children’s class teachers and animators were trained from within Differdange. These new friends brought others to participate in the activities, especially study circles.

One of the insights gained in the process was the conviction that there is increasing receptivity in Differdange and that home visits, previously thought to be foreign to Luxembourgish culture, are in fact a successful approach that helps build lasting friendships. This effort laid the foundation for a new culture to develop.

The initiative in Differdange has inspired many across the country to plan visits to friends and acquaintances in order to have meaningful conversations and to extend a clear invitation to join in community-building endeavours. The holding of reflection meetings with friends from the wider society is also a feature which other communities have learned about through the experience in Differdange. Such reflection spaces have helped other clusters to not only empower local friends but also enrich the body of knowledge and experience being acquired at the local level.

Albania

Albania, in the heart of the Balkan Peninsula in eastern Europe, covers a region that has been continuously inhabited by different civilizations for several thousand years. This long and rich history has resulted in an array of diverse languages, music, and cuisine.

Dotted throughout Albania are equally diverse groups of Bahá’ís and their friends, striving to lend their share to the spiritual transformation of their communities. The **Durrës** cluster in Albania is one such community. Over the span of several years, believers from nearby Tirana and elsewhere have travelled to Rrashbull, a village in the cluster, to support the efforts of a resident Bahá’í family with three young girls. One friend, prompted by his desire to see the three children growing up in the light of the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, travelled over an hour,

sometimes weekly, to bring a children's class teacher to the home to conduct a children's class and over the years a junior youth group.

With the support of these visiting friends, the family would sometimes discuss with a few of their neighbours the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. In response, some expressed their desire to see their own children receiving a sound moral and spiritual education. Others did not object to their children attending the children's class, though their attendance was not always regular.

As the years passed and the children of the Bahá'í family grew older, they were drawn deeper into conversations about the development of the community. The oldest daughter, by now a youth, contemplated the important contribution her generation had to make in this process, especially in assisting younger friends to “navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and become empowered to direct their energies towards the advancement of civilization”.⁹ Recognizing that others would want to be a part of such a noble goal, she gathered a group of friends to discuss the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme and, with great courage, also approached the headmaster at her school, who offered space in the school for activities.

In time, a group of seven reviewed the materials of the junior youth programme, with the help of a regularly visiting Auxiliary Board member. In the summer of 2013, the Board member helped the group to organize day camps for children and junior youth, and in July the group decided to participate in an intensive study of Ruhi Book 1. Despite budding enthusiasm and a sense of progress, no one from the group participated in the Tirana youth conference, which took place in August 2013. At first, this had felt like a failure to some, but soon it was recognized that the group was but a seedling and only needed more time to grow. Indeed, the group continued their study of the sequence, and in February 2014, after studying Book 3, the group decided to systematically start teaching children's classes. They involved their siblings and other children in the village, opening 3 classes with a total of 25 children. Each class had a pair of teachers and was divided according to the ages of the participants. The Board member accompanied them for the first few classes, helping to review the materials and prepare the lesson, but soon the teachers carried the classes independently.

Then, in March 2014, the oldest daughter gathered a group of seven friends to start a study of *Learning about Excellence*—one of the books of the junior youth programme. She and the Board member served as co-animators. The fledgling activities inspired everyone involved to engage in more conversations with community members, which in turn attracted a handful more people who were interested in studying the main sequence, some who studied the materials during intensive sessions.

The local friends, beginning to see in their efforts the elements of a sustained programme of growth, continue to plan and reflect together regularly. Their current focus is to sustain the existing activities—the children's classes and the junior youth groups—and to visit the families of the participants.

¹ Message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

² Ibid.

³ Riqdván 2010 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

⁴ *Insights from the Frontiers of Learning*, a document prepared by the International Teaching Centre (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2013), p. 9.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 8–9.

⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

⁸ Message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

⁹ Message dated 2 March 2013 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran.